

Moving on up: transitioning to secondary school in a time of Covid

Policy analysis from Chance UK

This briefing is the first in a series highlighting some of the major challenges children and young people in the UK face growing up. With the closure of schools as the result of three lockdowns in the last year and the severe disruption to the education of hundreds of thousands of children, the pandemic has had a negative impact on the emotional and social well-being of many children, particularly the vulnerable[1]. Research suggests that having low self-esteem and unpreparedness for secondary school can lead to a difficult transition. The disadvantage can last into adulthood.[2]

This briefing argues that pupils currently in Year 6 in England are particularly at risk from the effects of the pandemic and the government urgently needs to provide additional support for those children who are due to start secondary school in September 2021.

Introduction

Chance UK is an award-winning early intervention children's charity founded in 1995. Our vision is for every child in the UK to feel happy about themselves, realise their potential, and be confident in their ability to build a brighter future. We provide solutions-focused mentoring and family support for children aged 5-13 with behavioural and emotional difficulties, alongside group workshops designed to build social and emotional skills and resilience.

In 2018, The World Bank Development Report[3] identified the transition to secondary school as one of five important life stage transitions for young people: "Transition periods involve life changes during which individuals are particularly susceptible to change." [4] From our experience mentoring young people and supporting their families, we know that the move from primary to secondary school at age 11 can be one of the most stressful transitions pupils have to make, coming at the same time as the psychological, social and biological changes of adolescence.

Some pupils are more vulnerable than others and have a more negative transition experience[5]. The children most likely to have a difficult transition are the ones who have Special Educational Needs[6], those who may have experienced bullying; have concerns about their ability to do the work; are worried about having new and different teachers for subjects; and have fears about whether they will make friends.[7] For vulnerable children with social or emotional difficulties the transition can be the most difficult.[8] And there is evidence that educational inequalities are exacerbated between disadvantaged pupils and their peers during the first three years of secondary school. [9]

The importance of the transition from primary to secondary school

If it is handled well, a good transition can improve the academic attainment and well-being of students and set them on the course for success at secondary school and beyond. Most research shows that relationships with peers, developing academic abilities, and a stable state of mental health are vital components of adjusting to secondary education[10].

If the transition to secondary school is too difficult, the effect on young people, their well-being and their academic attainment can last beyond the first years at secondary school. Recent research has shown that pupils who have a poor experience of transfer can continue to have problems including higher levels of depression and poor attainment at 15 and 18. [11] Those most severely affected disengage from school at the transition period, have poor relationships with peers and teachers, are likely to have a higher risk of experiencing anxiety or depressive symptoms and are less likely to complete secondary school.

The additional challenges of moving up to secondary school 2021

But this year, it is going to be tough to get the transition right. There have been more than 100,000 deaths from Covid and children may well have been affected by the death of a family member or friend. Bereavements have generally been more intensified, because children have not been able to see family members and friends or go to funerals.[12] Even for those not directly affected, the prominence of illness and death on the news may cause particular anxiety[13].

Even for those who have not been affected in this way. Most have been at home for some months isolated from friends and the school environment and some will have experienced high levels of family stress and interrupted learning. The change of going to back to school will be intensified. There are likely to be fewer opportunities to visit new secondary schools and less chances of the experiences of autonomy which come with rites of passage like the Year 6 “school journey”.

Self-esteem, friendships and the confidence in the ability to make friends easily as well as get on with teachers – one of the key protective factors when children move to secondary school[14] – will have become more complicated. Those who may not yet have developed the social and emotional skills needed to manage this change will face the most challenges and are more likely to also have difficulties with academic learning[15].

In 2021 the number of children who will find the transition to secondary school challenging is likely to be much greater. This is because of the impact which COVID 19 has had on children's mental health and wellbeing. The latest research into the effect on the mental health of children and young people shows that those most affected by the latest lockdowns have been children aged between 4 and 10-years-old.[16] The study by Co-Space found that parents have reported an increase in behavioural, emotional, and restless/attentional difficulties since November 2020. Those with special educational needs and disabilities and those from low-income or single adult households have showed high levels of mental health symptoms throughout the pandemic according to the research.

When transition works

School connectedness[17] has been found to be one of the most important factors in a teenager who makes a good transition to secondary. That sense of belonging to their secondary school has been found to be key factor in pupils' social and cognitive development, leading to a sense of achievement and high self-esteem and good well-being. It is also a protective factor, which stops pupils engaging in health-risk behaviour and has positive educational outcomes. The role of good teacher-pupil relationships here is also key. If pupils have made a successful transition these are some of the characteristics that students will show according to UK research[18]:

- developing new friendships and improving their self-esteem and confidence
- having settled so well in school life that they caused no concerns to their parents
- showing an increasing interest in school and schoolwork
- getting used to their new routines and school organisation with great ease
- experiencing curriculum continuity

Transition in a time of Covid

This is going to be a particularly difficult time for Year 6 children who are going into Year 7. Although there are many things which primary and secondary schools do already to ease that transition: from open days and taster days at secondary schools themselves, to secondary teachers visiting primary schools, it is going to be important that primary and secondary schools recognise that many pupils will have a lot more difficulty making the transition this year and work together to ease this next phase for pupils.

A 2009 Bristol study showed that for individual vulnerable pupils[19], early intervention in the form of mentoring which focused on creating a strong sense of emotional well-being and confidence to deal with change was protective. The report suggested that the intervention should be skills-based, i.e. not directly targeting the emotional well-being. They emphasised that a key element in effecting change for vulnerable young people was building a consistent relationship with a trusted adult or a peer mentor, and young people in transition needed to be supported within the context of their family life wherever possible.

And the most recent study[20] on the effects on the educational attainment of transition on disadvantaged pupils identified absence in the early years of secondary school as an early indicator of underachievement, and suggested not only more primary and secondary school bridging projects, but more research into psychological support for disadvantaged pupils at transition which is showing promise in the USA[21].



Chance UK's mentoring and support work

For the past two years, Chance UK has been focusing on supporting children in Year 6 with their transition into secondary school, recognising the importance of building social and emotional skills.

Our universal workshops have been run with over 762 children in Westminster and Islington and supports children's capacity to think about change and how to manage it.

During our most recent workshops, primary school teachers reflected that this was the first time that they had had an opportunity to talk to pupils (over Teams!) about their hopes and fears over the transfer to secondary. They appreciated the workshops' focus on wellbeing and quelling anxiety. Children who participated said that they liked discussing preparing for change. One commented: **"Change is natural for everybody and it's ok to feel how you feel so you can talk to who you trust, for example a responsible adult."**

We also run a one-to-one mentoring programme for children with social and emotional and mental health needs who may need more intensive support to develop the confidence and self-esteem to make a good transition alongside supporting their parents or carers. Many children on the programme have been referred due to anxiety. The mentoring programme supports them to develop their confidence, self esteem and social and emotional skills through intensive 6- 9 months of mentoring which ends after children are in secondary school.

"I didn't have a lot of faith in myself but the mentor that I had made me speak up more and open up more. On a scale of 1-10 on how much I can trust people I've gone from a 1 to a 6. I have my doubts but now I take a deep breath and tell myself that I can trust people."

Chance UK Mentee

"It's the 1:1 that works so well with the Chance UK programme. A and P (Mentor) really managed to have a connection. There's stuff going on in A's life that has impacted her. She has always been a talker but it was great that she could talk to P so much. She opened up to her as another adult in her life with no pressures."

A's Carer

CASE STUDY 1:

Mentoring and learning to cook helped improve self-esteem

T finds it difficult to regulate his emotions and can get angry and frustrated in situations at school when he doesn't get his own way. He was very nervous about going to secondary school and felt a lot of pressure about the move. T felt isolated and lonely and was experiencing many emotional and behavioural challenges.

Chance UK provided T with a mentor. They did mindfulness mentoring sessions and various breathing exercises. They also developed strategies for feeling calm. When lockdown happened, he and his mentor moved activities online. They decided on a series of cooking sessions. T hadn't done any cooking before this, but it was an area where he wanted to gain more experience. Together they made cakes, pancakes and spring rolls. His mother has been helping him with the cooking which they both enjoy.

"My mentor encouraged me to talk to people more and tell people how I feel and to choose my friends wisely."

Chance UK Mentee

Outcomes

At the end of T's time with us, T hasn't been getting into incidents at school. He was experiencing particular difficulties with his IT teacher, but there is now less friction. The relationship between him and his mother has become stronger and they are continuing to cook together. T has also increased in confidence and is more open. He doesn't feel the same levels of anxiety that he felt before starting secondary school.

CASE STUDY 2:

Using art to reduce anxiety and be more reflective

H was referred to us due to the high levels of anxiety she was experiencing that were manifesting as physical symptoms such as sickness and stomach problems. The anxiety was due to incidents of bullying and not feeling safe at school, which meant she missed a lot of primary school and had quite a negative view and experience of school and education. She was worried about attending secondary school without the support of her father taking her each day. Her school also reported that H appeared to prefer the company of adults, often choosing to spend break times inside helping teachers rather than in the playground.

"I now feel more relaxed about moving on to secondary school."

Chance UK Mentee

In mentoring sessions, the mentor and H incorporated mindfulness colouring in exercises and did art projects together. The mentor and H went trampolining, developing a routine and practising new moves to develop self-confidence. H also attended a group workshop facilitated by Chance UK on Dealing with Anxieties.

Outcomes

H has become much more confident, and reflective. During the art sessions H reflected on her experience of primary school and how far she has developed and changed in terms of her confidence and described that she rarely feels anxious anymore. H enjoys attending secondary school and says that she feels more comfortable voicing her opinions and saying how she feels.

Chance UK asks

Collaborative working for summer schools

Summer school funding for the Covid-catch up scheme should involve local clusters of primary and secondary schools running joint projects to ease the transition for those in Year 6. Opportunities to collaborate virtually as well as in person should be used.

- 1.** Primary and secondary schools should work together to provide opportunities for Year 6s to prepare for the transition into Year 7. This needs to focus on preparing for change and understanding what's ahead as well as emotional wellbeing rather than solely focusing on academic support. These should focus on helping them understand more about life at secondary school as well as talk through anxieties and worries and helping them develop strategies to cope with change.

Information sessions for parents/carers

- 2.** Secondary schools should also be engaging families of students about to go into Year 7 by providing information sessions about what it will be like so that parents and carers are able to support children through the transition.

Tailored support for vulnerable children

- 3.** Students who are more vulnerable, particularly those who have not engaged with online learning at primary school or may have been absent, need to be identified through joint working between primary and secondary schools so that they can have tailored support to help develop the emotional well-being and confidence to make the transition to secondary school easier.

4. Make 're-connection' a priority

Schools should be making re-connection a priority. A sense of belonging for new Year 7s should be nurtured and an emphasis put on helping them make friendships and good relationships with teachers.

5. Support for Year 6s to gain skills for success

In more usual times Primary schools should be supporting all Year 6s to develop skills for success at secondary school like organising themselves and independent travel. This year, summer activities might help them to develop the confidence and opportunities for growing independence which so many have missed.

6. Secondary school teachers will need to spend time getting to know the new Year 7s

Secondary school teachers will need to spend time to get to know the Year six pupils who will be joining them next year and understand how the school can help rebuild their resilience as well as catch up academically on lost school days.

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